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From RAE to REF: Trust and Atmosphere in UK Higher Education Reform

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Abstract

This analytical paper aims to examine trust and research atmosphere in higher education in the case of UK. It takes an economics perspective and draws on a conceptual framework developed by Hallén and Sandström (1991). It argues that the current Higher Education reform risks making the research atmosphere move from 'trustful' towards 'opportunistic'. The UK government has recently taken a new turn with regard to its research and funding policies for universities: changing from a supply to a demand model, with an emphasis on research impacts. Initiatives, such as Research Excellence Framework (REF), can have adverse effects on trust and research atmosphere in higher education. Without trust, the integrity of scientific enquiry in higher education is undermined. This paper therefore investigates the detrimental impacts of such turn of research and funding policies on higher education. A call is made for real politics in higher education.

Keywords: Higher Education management, Education reform, Trust and Academic integrity, REF Research Excellence Framework, Higher Education policy, UK Higher Education, Research policy, RAE Research Assessment Exercise

From RAE to REF: Trust and Atmosphere in Higher Education Reform

Significant changes in European higher education over recent decades and present higher education reforms in most European countries, accompanied by financial cuts in higher education funding, are likely to have great influence in the ways of advancing and transmitting knowledge and other activities in academia. These changes concern all the disciplines and domains in higher education. Universities which used to serve as the conscience and critic of societies are finding themselves facing new challenges in these times of financial turmoil. Important questions are therefore raised: What makes scientific activities valuable? What makes a university meaningful? What is the future for universities?

A similar debate also takes place in France. The French government recently announced a new higher education reform based on the University Autonomy Law 2004. The core of the second stage of this reform is the encouragement of private funding for research and a stress on applied research. This influences not only universities but also the National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS) which produces most fundamental research in France. The French President advocated his support for it and claimed that fundamental research will flourish only with private funding (Sarkozy, 2009, Jan 22). With a threat to the integrity of higher education and fundamental research, this reform has provoked a widespread series of academic strikes at both universities and CNRS between January and April 2009.

This analytical paper contributes to this debate by exploring two important concepts, trust and atmosphere, in the case of UK higher education reform at present. The UK government has taken a new turn with regard to its policies on scientific research and its funding for the universities. More emphasises are going to be put on the measure of research impact. These new initiatives not only signify a change in direction in terms of government's research agenda, but also can have effects on trust and research atmosphere in higher education. This paper therefore would like to examine the impact of such turn of research/funding policies on trust and atmosphere in UK higher education.

It is contended that the current research policy environment created by the UK government risks making the higher education research atmosphere move away from 'trustful' to 'opportunistic'. This study takes an economics perspective and draws on a conceptual framework developed by Hallén and Sandström (1991). It begins with an examination of current UK research environment shaped by recent changes in its research policies. It is followed by a discussion of the concepts of trust and atmosphere by drawing on Hallén and Sandström's conceptual framework. It then analyses these concepts in the current situation of UK higher education, followed by a discussion of the influence of opportunism on the integrity of scientific enquiry. From the above analysis and discussion, a call is made – 'real politics' in higher education.

Replacing RAE with REF: From a Supply Model to Demand Model

The change from Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) to Research Excellence Framework (REF) not only means a reform of research evaluation in UK higher education sector, but also marks a significant move from a supply position to a demand position that the UK government is holding. This change in direction was demonstrated in the Warry Report (2006).

Following the government publication, Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-2014: Next Steps (HM Treasury, 2004), the Director General of the Science and Innovation in the government made a request at the Research Council Economic Impact Group to follow it up and work out how the Research Councils can demonstrate the economic impact of the investments.

One of major messages from this report is the change of government's position in relation to universities and business. Based on a very simplified and linear "transmission mechanism" from knowledge transfer process to economic impact, it argues that the Research Councils need to move themselves from the supply end, "research base" (namely higher education and research institutions), to the demand end, "firm and government activities, and consumer welfare" (Warry, 2006, p. 10-11). Research Councils were instructed to work with Funding Councils on economic impact: "Research Councils deliver economic impact through Universities and research institutes, in co-operation with Funding councils and economic development agencies" (ibid., p. 2). Consequently, the major task of Research Councils is to "influence the behaviours of universities, research institutes and Funding councils in ways that will increase the economic impact of Research Council funding" (ibid., p. 3). The rationale behind this significant change of position is to ensure that the UK will maintain its top position in the global economy especially facing rising economies, such as China and India (ibid., p. 6).

In this report, the agenda is clearly set: in order to ensure that the UK will remain at its top place in "high value added industries" in the world, Research Councils are urged to act in three areas:

- their **leadership** of the knowledge transfer agenda;
- their role in **influencing** knowledge transfer behaviour of universities and Research Council institutes;
- Increasing their **engagement** with user organisations. (original bold, Warry Report, 2006, p. 2)

This important alteration of government's position results in two influential initiatives in the evaluation of academic research. Both Research Councils and Funding Councils take up measures of economic impacts in its allocation of research resources. To begin with, at university level, HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) introduces the assessment of research impacts in the new initiative of Research Excellence Framework (REF), which replaced Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and take place in 2013.

This makes REF distinct from its precedent, RAE. The major differences between the two can be analysed along four dimensions (Table 1). First, due to the change in direction with regard to Funding Council's position, the main features of research assessment have changed from output-focused (RAE) to outcome-focused (REF). Different from normal economic models which hold private sectors (industries, business or firms) responsible to respond to the demands of markets and consumers, Warry Report requires universities to answer these demands directly – mapping universities at the front line of the business alongside other players of private sectors. This demand position with strong emphasis on external references makes REF focus on assessing the outcomes of research – the economic and social impacts of research. This is in contrast to RAE. In RAE, Funding Councils posited themselves with academia. In other words, it is located at the supply end of research – research is judged by its own values. This supply position with self reference makes RAE focus on assessing the output of research – concentrating on the "originality, significance and rigour" of the research (HEFCE, 2008, p. 8).

Table 1: Comparison between RAE and REF

	RAE	REF
Funding Councils' position	Supply End	Demand End
Main features	<i>Output-oriented</i> Unit level of assessment	<i>Outcome-oriented</i> Impact on "desirable behaviours" at individual, unit and institutional levels
"Research" definition	"Original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding"	"A process of investigation leading to new insights effectively shared"
Key elements for assessment	Research output	Research outcome: Economic impacts Research output Research environment
Assessment methods	Peer review	Peer review Bibliometric citation information Case study

Sources: compiled by the author drawing on the materials discussed in the text and RAE2008 Guidance on submissions (HEFCE, 2005), Research Excellence Framework second consultation on the assessment and funding of research (HEFCE, 2009)

Furthermore, apart from the original purpose of allocating research funding, REF itself is seen to be designed for other purposes too - promoting “desirable behaviours”:

By continuing the practice adopted in the RAE of assessing bodies of activity at the level of coherent academic groupings, we will be able to use the REF to encourage desirable behaviours at three levels:

- the behaviour of individual researchers within a submitted unit
- research units, as the level at which research activity is primarily managed
- whole HEIs – the level at which the block grant is allocated

(HEFCE, 2009, p. 8)

The REF intends to control the behaviour not only at institutional level, but also at unit and individual levels.

Next, the change in Funding Councils’ position is also reflected in the definition of research. In RAE 2008, the research is defined as: “original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding” (HEFCE, 2005, p. 34) (which is effectively the same in RAE 2001), where the legitimate self-referenced value of academic knowledge is recognised. Conversely, in REF, research is defined as “a process of investigation leading to new insights effectively shared” (HEFCE, 2009, p. 6). The meaning of ‘shared insights’ refers to “achieve impact beyond the discipline, benefiting the economy or society” (ibid., p. 6), “effective sharing of its research findings with a range of audiences” (ibid., p. 6) and “benefits to the economy and society” (ibid., p. 7).

It is, therefore, not surprising to see that one of the key elements for assessment in REF is the measure of research impact. It is introduced to be a significant component for research assessment for the first time. “Impact” means “demonstrable economic and social impacts that have been achieved through activity within the submitted unit that builds on excellent research” (HEFCE, 2009, p. 7). According to HEFCE’s current proposal, the impacts of academic research decides a quarter of the block funding of research. That means, each university department will be judged by the “economic and social impact” that their research makes, and this alone will contribute to 25% of their marks. Another new initiative is the use of bibliometric citation information to supplement peer review on research output.

This corresponds to an earlier decision taken by UK Research Councils in funding research projects. Since early 2009, researchers applying for funding from Research councils have to demonstrate the economic impacts of their research projects. The reason for this is that “as current world leaders, the UK research community needs to seize the opportunities offered, and that is why the UK Research Councils are placing an increasing focus on the impact of the research we fund” (Diamond et al., 2009). For example, academics are required to submit a two page impact plan in each application to EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council). Similar requirements are also found in other research councils, such as ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council), STFC (Science and Technology Facilities Council) and AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council).

These impact measures have provoked an outcry in academia. They are criticised for favoring certain types of research, attenuating pure and basic research, devaluing scientific endeavour, and threatening academic freedom (Green, 2008; Braben, 2009; Bird et al., 2009; comments follow The Guardian, 2009). In a letter to The Times, RCUK defends its position: “This will not disadvantage basic research, or stifle research creativity or scientific discovery. Excellence will continue to be the primary criterion for funding and we fully believe that the highest-quality research will, over time, have the greatest impact” (Diamond et al., 2009). Notwithstanding, funding will concentrate in those research areas which have the greatest economic impact, such as the green economy, life sciences, the digital economy, high-value manufacturing systems and services, and the cultural and creative industries from 2010 (Lewcock, 2009).

Furthermore, the universities are facing a budget cut of more than £500 million from the government in the 2010-11 academic year. This is going to influence teaching and research. In a letter to Guardian, leaders of top UK universities, the Russell Group, warned that the budget cut can lead to the “meltdown” of UK higher education sector and “bring it to its knees” (Arthur & Piatt, 2009). If this is the current situation of UK higher education, then the questions will be: what does this reform, the change from supply to demand model, mean for higher education? What is the role of trust? How does the demand model bear the concept of trust? How does the reform influence the atmosphere of higher education? What is the relationship between atmosphere and trust in higher education?

Atmosphere and Trust

It may be true that trust and cooperation is not always desirable, for example, among robbers or gangsters (Schelling, 1984; Gambetta, 2000). However, the above circumstances are not the concern of this study. The assumption/priori of this study is that in the context of higher education and government, trust is an important and necessary condition, and

therefore desirable, for the successful development of any activity in universities. Economists are interested in the “added values” of trust, and therefore its interactions/ relations with other ideas. Of particular interest here is the concept of atmosphere.

The relationship between trust and atmosphere is a self-enhancing one. Ruppel and Harrington (2000) reasoned that climate is an antecedent of trust. They argued that a climate which encourages cooperation and the sense of equity can lead to atmosphere of trust; where a climate which stresses self-interest results in opportunism or inequity.

Atmosphere here is defined as the emotional setting of a relationship, where joint adventure takes place (Blomqvist, 1997). It is a mixture of “the feelings, intentions, will, and interest” of the parties concerned (Hallén & Sandström, 1991, p. 110). It relates to how one party perceives or feels about the other parties and how they believe that the other party perceive/feel about them. In other words, atmosphere is a “perceptual phenomenon” (ibid., p. 113). Although atmosphere to a great extent is decided by factors external to individuals, it is through the individuals that atmosphere is brought into existence and has a direct influence on the individuals. Atmosphere is close to the concept of ‘climate’ which stresses shared perceptions of events and behaviours (Klein & Sorra, 1996).

Atmosphere is acknowledged by Williamson (1975, 1985) when he developed transaction cost economics (TCE). However, trust didn’t receive much attention in his theory. It is not until the emergence of “neo-institutionalist” economics in the 1990s, influenced by sociology, that trust has gained its important position in the discussion of atmosphere and the inter-firm relationships (Nooteboom, 1996).

For Hallén and Sandström (1991), trust is one of the dimensions of atmosphere, together with other dimensions such as cooperativeness, power and commitment. In relation to other concepts, trust is characterised by its “long-term attitude of relying upon the other party in the relationship, where negative incidents can be tolerated provided long-term expectations of positive developments” (ibid., p. 120). This definition makes trust in almost opposite position to another concept, ‘opportunism’.

In contrast to trust, opportunism is “a short-term perspective, where opportunities are exploited without consideration for the interests of the other party” (ibid., p. 120). Williamson (1993) referred it as “self-interest seeking with guile”. In TCE theory, trust is conceptualised as a governance mechanism to lower the transaction cost in an exchange relation (Sako, 1997). Conversely, opportunism increases such cost since it creates risks, uncertainty and makes the process of exchange inefficient.

Another important factor which is worth considering is the concept of power. Exchange processes are often marked by its asymmetric power structure, for example, in principal-agent relationships (Lado et al., 2008). In an imbalanced power situation, the interaction of atmosphere, trust and opportunism can vary. Hallén and Sandström (1991) developed a framework to illustrate different types of atmosphere when trust, opportunism and power are considered (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Atmospheres classified by power balance and trust

	Trust	Opportunism
Power balance	Peers	Competitors
Power imbalance	Paternalism	Bully/underdog

(Hallén and Sandström, 1991, p. 122)

According to them, in a situation of balanced power where both parties are perceived as equals, a trustful atmosphere will make the relationship like peers. That is, both parties can negotiate on joint issues with an expectation of being reciprocally rewarding. This atmosphere can be expected to contribute to a good working environment for individuals and relate to high degree of understanding.

However, when there is no trust in a power balanced relationship, the atmosphere becomes competitive. An atmosphere of competition denotes few cooperativeness, understanding and commitment.

In a situation when the power is imbalanced, there is a risk for the exploitation of the relationship. When it is not exploited, the trustful atmosphere facilitates paternalism, which is similar to the concept of peers. However, if the imbalanced situation is exploited, trust is replaced by opportunism and the ‘bully/underdog’ atmosphere is created. This corresponds to Nooteboom’s (1996) analysis of trust and cooperation. Williams (2000) identified four sources of cooperation at both micro and macro levels against egotistic and non-egotistic dimension. By using Williams’ typology, Nooteboom (ibid.) reasoned that trust is more related to non-egotistic sources of cooperation than egotistic sources, such as coercion or material self-interest. Trust is formed based on ethics or values of proper conduct at macro level, or bonds of friendship, kinship or empathy at micro level, which is usually not linked to the motives of self-interest in a strict sense.

This non-egotistic feature of trust is associated with the view that trust has a social meaning. It maintained that trust can form a basis for the benevolence dimension of corporate climate, because it can exist without the calculation of self-interest. Whitener et al. (1998) showed that trust demonstrates concern or benevolence.

In other words, trust is characterised by its extra-subjective recognition nature in a long-term perspective. The non-egotistic dimension with a subjective probability of believing that other party will not abuse the dependence shows an extended confidence in other party's unforeseen behaviour. An atmosphere reflective of such orientation would tend to lead to cooperation rather than coercion or bully.

The atmosphere of bully or coercion, in contrast, has little to do with trust. It is simply to ensure submission and compliance of unwilling subjects who haven't pre-committed themselves (Gambetta, 2000). It causes asymmetric power relationship, destroys the mutual trust on equal basis, and brings about resentment. Gambetta pointed out the "self-defeating" nature of coercion (ibid.). It may be true that coercion or bully can enforce some kind of 'cooperation', but it also increases the possibility of negative acts, such as betrayal and defection. "While demanding less of *our* trust in others, may simultaneously *reduce* the trust that others have in us" (ibid., p. 220).

Bully or coercion, following this logic, means a failure to deal with the freedom of others. Trust, on the contrary, is associated with 'freewill' choices, freedom of others and risk taking (Sako, 1997; Nooteboom, 1996; Luhmann, 1988). Trust enters the relationship, first, when both parties have or are given the choices and freedom to walk away from the joint adventure or be disloyal, and second, when both sides are willing to take such risk. It is related to "accepted vulnerability" to others' ill will: "one leaves others an opportunity to harm one when one trusts, and also shows one's confidence that they will not take it" (Baier, 1986).

This kind of freedom is also called 'exit', the possibility of betrayal and defection (Lorenz, 2000; Dasgupta, 2000). In the case of bully or coercion, there is only one party who enjoys this kind of freedom, and the other party has no exit. In this case, trust is not pertinent here, because one can only 'hope' instead of trust (Gambetta, 2000). Luhmann (1979) highlighted the importance of the element of choice in trust. He reasoned that in the case of no choice, one is forced to give in to the power. In this case, it is a matter of confidence rather than trust. In the case of having free choice to engaging in the relationship as in a trustful atmosphere, it is the mutual responsibility of both sides if things go wrong. However, in the case of coercion or without choice, it is the party who has the power to blame if it goes wrong.

Dissimilar to trust, opportunism are featured by its calculated nature (Williamson, 1985), its short-term perspective and self-interest at the expenses of the mutual agreement or other party's interest (Hallén and Sandström, 1991). For Williamson, opportunism goes 'lower' than self-interest due to its "predatory tendencies" (1993, p. 98). In both cases of self-interest and predatory behaviour, they lack what Adam Smith referred as benevolence which trust processes (Gambetta, 2000). Empirical studies in general support the argument that opportunism within principal-agent relationships has a negative impact on performance and the partnership (Rindfleisch & Heide, 1997; Heide & John, 1990).

From Trust to Opportunism? Research Atmosphere in UK Higher Education

In the reform of UK research assessment, the move from a supply model to a demand model signifies a change from an atmosphere of trust towards opportunism in the system. In this section, I will examine how this reform influences the three important dimensions of research atmosphere in higher education.

Since Second World War, or more precisely after 1980s of Thatcher's regime, the successive UK governments already withdrew its trust in their higher education institutions (Trow, 2005). What replaced it is so called "rituals of verifications" (Power, 1997, 1994) existing in various forms, such as control, audits or assurance techniques, which merely provide a temporary sense of certainty for the government and do not probe the real issues of quality. In other words, UK higher education has long been colonised by the public sector managerialism.

Against this background, the recent UK research assessment reform therefore is not a surprising development. It is only part of this historical trend in the UK politics in order to allow the government to gain more control over higher education sector. However, the distinctive feature of this reform lies in its orientation towards opportunism embedded in the demand model. I would like to point out that the power imbalance between the government and higher education institutions intensifies such opportunist move - with an orientation towards the coercion/bully atmosphere. According to the framework offered by Hallén and Sandström (Figure 1), it is reasoned that a supply model signifies a competitive atmosphere, while a demand model facilitates a coercion/bully atmosphere. Three major dimensions of atmosphere created by the reform are examined. A comparison between supply and demand models in the different atmosphere dimensions are offered in Table 2.

Table 2: Supply and Demand Models in Major Atmosphere Dimensions

Atmosphere Dimensions	Supply model	Demand model
Perspective emphasis	Possibility for medium-term perspective	Short-term calculated perspective
Freewill choices	Some choices over other types of research Research volumes Limited risk taking	Limited freewill choices (Promotion of certain type of research) Research with 'desirable results' -impact beyond the discipline Risk averse
Recognition of disinterested pursuit of truth in universities	Superficial recognition Output-oriented	Not concerned Outcome-oriented Economic impacts

Source: compiled by the author from the materials discussed in the text

In the supply model, two main assumptions can be identified:

- Doing scientific research is the most important function of higher education.
- If higher education produces large volumes of research, it fulfils its own purpose.

These assumptions represent an over-simplified stance. It reflects a superficial understanding of scientific research and its role in higher education and knowledge advancement. It does not distinguish, for example, the major typologies of research, their unique contributions to the knowledge and therefore the distinctive support required from each of them. This stance, not surprisingly, leads to an outcome-focused approach, which stresses the quantity of research, in other words, research volumes. All different types of research are assessed in the same way.

The supply model embodied in RAE supports what Kuhn called, normal science (1962/1996). Its measure is dominated by the quantitative output of research, which represents an emphasis on the accumulative nature of knowledge. Owing to this, it permits limited risk taking research activities for scientists. Although it is output-oriented and seriously flawed in many other aspects (Kushner, 1996; Talib, 2000, 2001; Banatvala et al., 2005; Sikes, 2006; Alldred & Miller, 2007; Lee, 2007; Oppenheim, 2008; Macilwain, 2009), the supply model nevertheless leaves some limited space for other types of research, therefore supports to some extent the freewill choices of scientists and some possibility for medium-term vision.

Dissimilar to the supply model, the demand model is characterised by its short-term vision, requirement of immediate response and its calculated nature. The emphasis of research outcome creates a risk averse environment. This environment not only impedes the rise of scientific revolutions (Kuhn, *ibid.*) but also poses a threat to the development of normal science. The demand model which encourages only one type of research, research with demonstrable economic impacts, leaves almost no freewill choices for scientists. According to Hallén and Sandström (1991), this leads to a coercion type of opportunism atmosphere.

Two major assumptions underlying the demand model can be identified:

- Higher education is a player in the market and therefore should directly fulfil the 'demands' raised from the market.
- Scientific research can play miracles. If higher education produces research with 'high immediate economic impacts', the decline of economy or national strength will be saved.

What underlies the demand model is an ignorant stance: first on the intrinsic values of higher education, second on the falsified link between higher education research and economy. One of the intrinsic values of higher education, which has a direct relevance here, is the disinterested pursuit and advancement of knowledge. Scientific research for centuries has played a vital role in advancing human knowledge through either normal science or scientific revolutions (Kuhn, 1996). Scientific knowledge laid and becomes the foundation for all kinds of human civilisations.

The transforming power brought by scientific research exists in two orders: the first to the domain of knowledge; next, to the wider social contexts. The first order creates a significant space in science in order to allow all the scientific pursuits possible (Kuhn, 1996). It provides a base for any scientific endeavour to happen, from academic debates, discussions, or incremental contributions to scientific revolutions, paradigm changes, or the rise of new disciplines. This scientific space is a source of all the scientific possibilities. It is also because of the existence of the first order that

the second order can occur: the applications of scientific research to wider social contexts. The first order with its transforming power feeds into the second order.

One important element which I would like to highlight here is time. It takes time for profound qualitative changes taking place first in the first order, such as scientific revolutions or paradigm shift, as well as for passing the transforming power from the first to second order. It will again take time for significant qualitative changes happen in the second order.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on calculation with a short-term vision reflected in the demand model signifies a narrow version of second order. In other words, it fails to recognise, first, the importance of the intrinsic value of scientific research - namely the first order; next, the importance of time dimension. Without the first order and the consideration of time, the transforming power of scientific research in the second order cannot last if it ever happens. This is because the first order is the source or foundation which permits all scientific endeavour and creativity, and supports all the other orders. The failure to recognise the first order is to undermine or being cut off from one's own surviving resources, which will eventually lead to self defeat.

Owing to the above reasons, the move from a supply model to a demand model represents a change from a competitive mode of opportunist atmosphere to a coercive one.

Opportunism and Integrity of Scientific Enquiry

The prevalence of an opportunist atmosphere, especially a coercive one, is damaging for the Higher Education sector. Two major damages can be identified: disappearing passion for knowing and compliant culture. To begin with, what Higher Education will lose under an opportunist atmosphere is the Passion for knowing. This is because an opportunist has no real passion for knowledge itself. What academic opportunists concern are the attached values which scientific enquiries bring about, such as desirable impacts, amount of research grants, quantity of publications and career advance opportunities. The passion for knowledge is simply replaced by instrumental or strategic knowing. Knowledge is no longer an end in itself; it becomes a means to an end. Passion for knowing corresponds to the true love of knowledge (Elton, 2001). If wisdom can be defined as the ability to liberate ourselves in thoughts or actions in a world where lives are contradictory and subject to constant change in their nature, the passion for knowledge can be interpreted as liberation of truth. Such passion plays a central role in academic integrity.

Failing to retain such passion for knowledge, higher education risks its integrity of scientific enquiry. If integrity is defined as "the state or quality of being complete, undivided, (and) unbroken" (Baltimore, 1999: 260), the integrity of scientific enquiry can be elaborated at two levels – individual and system. An integral academic means someone who takes the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge seriously. S/he loves the subject. S/he constantly contests and critiques the current knowledge as well as commits her/himself to the investigation of the unknown. Meanwhile, s/he is passionate of sharing the both the understanding and the pleasure of discovery to others and the next generation.

Integral higher education refers to a system which seeks the perfection or completeness of knowledge. It is actively engaged in challenging itself, pioneering in new fields of knowledge as well as being the conscience and critic of society. Such system places the passion for knowing at its centre: it shares its love by engaging students and the wider public through its disseminating activities, such as teaching and public lectures; it shows its love by being self-critical and by creating supportive space for creative and adventurous scientific endeavours.

Unfortunately, while the passion for knowing is faded away in an opportunist atmosphere of higher education, the integrity of scientific enquiry at both individual and system levels are disappearing too. This means, academics are no longer truly passionate about knowledge or advancing knowledge for its own sake. They have other agenda in mind. For higher education system, it means that there is no longer space for genuine scientific enquiries, because all is steered by other motives. The love is lost. The students can no longer feel the love of knowledge from the academics. The society can no longer feel the love of pursuing true enquiries from the universities.

The opportunist atmosphere replaces the passion for knowing, in this case, with 'desirable' economic impacts. It is not surprising that some academics would have other agenda in mind than their passion for knowing and pursuing knowledge. For other academics, the opportunist atmosphere will simply lead to a compliant culture. There is little space left for genuine pursuit of knowledge.

For example, the REF's intention to control "desirable behaviours" not only at institutional level, but also at unit and individual levels is alarming (HEFCE, 2009 & Table 1 in the first section). This can pose problems for academic autonomy and the furtherance of knowledge. If the government only encourages "desirable behaviours", namely economic impacts of research, at institutional level, individual research units and researchers can still have to some extent academic autonomy and freedom to pursue their own scientific enquiries. This is how the RAE used to function. However, the intention of the REF to steer the research behaviours even at unit and individual levels create compliant

culture, which can seriously undermine the originality of scientific enquiry and therefore impede the advancement of knowledge.

Research units under the REF scheme will no longer have the academic freedom to explore research themes which are not directly relevant to 'economic impacts'. Individual researchers will have limited freedom to follow their scientific instinct of curiosity and their line of original enquiry. One of the consequences can be predicted is the 'risky' research areas caused by the REF scheme in current knowledge system. Those 'risky' research areas are likely to be those which are high at their abstraction level and therefore have difficulties in showing immediate-economic-impact results. The obvious ones are the theoretical, conceptual, philosophical and metaphysical fields of any discipline or subject. Research themes or research ideas in those areas which fail to produce 'desirable' outcomes for the REF will be discriminated. The recent closure of Philosophy Department at Middlesex University is one of the examples. Those areas usually provide foundations for a discipline. The discrimination against those areas will be self-handicapping because it dries out the source of creativity, stagnates the discovery of new paradigms and therefore hinders the continual furtherance of knowledge in different disciplines. Eventually the whole knowledge development suffers.

Call for Real Politics in Higher Education

On the other hand, another question worth asking is: does higher education really lose the public trust? According to Trow (1996), the answer is no. It is just a convenient argument for those who would like to increase the accountability of higher education to the state. If this is the case, then the question is: how to convert public trust into useful political power for higher education?

In responding to this question, I would like to make a call - call for "real politics" in higher education. Trow (2005) argued that UK universities are politically very weak. They have no 'friends' outside academia. My view is slightly different from Trow's. In my opinion, it is rather the voices of academic communities that are not heard. UK universities have some political influence. For example, eight out of 15 HEFCE board and the chairman/chief executive of all seven Research Councils are university managers. However, these voices don't really reflect the views of wide academic communities. They are the voices mainly from a small group of people at management level, namely university professional managers.

Since 1980s, UK scientific communities have adopted this "laissez faire" attitude towards government's politics even when it concerns academic communities themselves. Perhaps it is also time for academic communities to reflect on their roles in the political agenda? A more engaging approach towards research policies than before can be considered.

Conclusion

This study investigates the concept of trust in current higher education research policy reform in the UK. It identifies a significant change in the government's research policy direction. It moves away from a supply model which is featured by its stress on research output, towards a demand model which is characterised by its emphasis on research impact.

Trust has different bearings in these two models. According to Hallén and Sandström's framework, concepts of atmosphere, power and opportunism are all relevant to trust. Trust is a long-term attitude with positive expectation existing in the atmosphere of a joint relationship. It is featured by its extra-subjective recognition nature, its non-egotistic dimension and its respect for others 'freewill' choices. In contrast, opportunism is a short-term attitude characterised by its self-interest orientation. When trust doesn't exist in a power balanced relationship, the atmosphere becomes competitive. On the other hand, in a power imbalanced relationship, when trust is replaced by opportunism, the atmosphere is featured by bully/underdog.

From this angle, the supply model signifies a competitive atmosphere. It adopts an over-simplified stance due to its superficial understanding of scientific research and the role of research in knowledge creation process. Nevertheless, it gives some space for freewill choices of scientists and some possibility for medium-term vision.

Distinctive from the supply model, the demand model signifies a coercion type of opportunist atmosphere. It adopts an ignorant stance first on the intrinsic values of higher education and second on the falsified link between scientific research and economy. It leaves little space for freewill choices of scientists. This model characterised by its short-term vision, immediate response and its calculated nature will eventually leads to its self defeat.

Drawing from the above analysis, the current UK higher education reform signifies an absence of trust and a move towards a coercive atmosphere of opportunism. Such opportunist atmosphere destroys the love of knowledge and creates a compliant culture. The loss of the love of knowledge damages the integrity of scientific enquiry. A compliant culture threatens the academic freedom and furtherance of knowledge.

A call for real politics in higher education is therefore made. The current voices from UK universities don't seem to reflect the wider academic communities. The voice of higher education is dominated by professional managers at

universities. It seems there are discrepancies between the views of those at management level and academic communities in the universities. The real voice of academic communities seems to be unheard. Perhaps it is time for academic communities to change its 'laissez faire' attitude and do some real politics of higher education - create a political space for their own and for the future of higher education.

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